

Venture syndicalism: fanning and dousing the flames of discontent



Article from the Industrial Worker newspaper on fast food strikes in the U.S.

Currently, organizations funded by unions are trying to win legislation requiring higher pay in the U.S. fast food industry under slogans like “Fight for a Fair Economy.” Pay increases are great, but these efforts fit into something I called “venture syndicalism” in a [column last month](#). We can see elements of a theory of venture syndicalism in a document called “Joining Voices: Inclusive Strategies for Labor’s Renewal,” which the American Federation of Teachers put out in 2005. (For more on this see Joe Burns’ excellent book “Reviving The Strike.”) While that document did not originate within the “Fight for a Fair Economy” campaign, it can help us get a sense of the discussions in the mainstream labor movement that inform that campaign and will probably inform future efforts. “Joining Voices” explains that “existing unions have much to risk and lose,” that is, lots of money which make them vulnerable to fines, if they violate laws against “secondary boycotts and shutdowns, sit-down strikes, etc.” But new unions “with no accumulated treasuries...would have substantially less to lose” and so could “enjoy greater strategic and tactical flexibility” to carry out “unconventional tactics unencumbered by the restraints of current labor law.”

“Joining Voices” called for existing and wealthier unions to provide “money, logistical assistance, long-term loaned staff and other help” to “organizing committees of start-up unions” while allowing these new “start-up unions” to be fully independent, at least formally. If these “start-up unions” succeeded, “increasing union density in any sector, by any union”



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If these “start-up unions” succeeded, “increasing union density in any sector, by any union”

would benefit “all union members everywhere and the labor movement as a whole.” Because these start-up unions have few resources, they are more able to break the law. The

independence of these “start-up unions” would create “institutional firewalls for donor unions.” If there was a violation of the law, the independent “start-up,” with its smaller treasury, would take the hit, not the donor union with the big treasury. That’s the “venture”

part of venture syndicalism.

Here’s the “syndicalism” part, though it’s more like “so-called syndicalism.” Unions today are experimenting in two important ways, by fighting for union contracts without going through National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections, and sometimes by “organizing outside collective bargaining,” to quote “Joining Voices” again. Efforts to pass laws requiring higher wages are an attempt to go around the NLRB while keeping the government as a key part of guaranteeing workers’ livelihoods. That is, they are an effort to abandon the NLRB

while getting a different part of the state to play a role in mediating between

workers and capitalists.

These efforts to go outside the NLRB are based on unions' understanding that the NLRB is broken. Workers lose NLRB elections lose more often than they win. The odds of getting a first contract after an election are equally awful, for those workers who do manage to win the initial election. The NLRB has little power to punish employers who break the law in fighting workers who organize. Staughton Lynd and Daniel Gross's "Labor Law for the Rank and Filer," a book every IWW member ought to read, lays this out quite well. So does Burns'

"Reviving the Strike." This criticism of the NLRB is a big part of recent discussion in the IWW about so-called "direct unionism." Staff and officers in the business unions are at least as aware of the limits of the NLRB as we are in the IWW. The decline of the NLRB marks an important historic shift, as the U.S. capitalist class and government have largely abandoned unions as tools for governing capitalism. Largely due to the NLRB, unions played a key role in how mid-20th century U.S. capitalism was governed and maintained.

Venture syndicalism is part of a larger trend of "militant reformism." I point this out because it is easy for us to get swept up in struggles carried out by sincere people and to forget about the fundamental character of the organizations involved. Even when they use exciting, innovative, militant tactics, reformist unions are still committed to "the conservative motto,

'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work,' " as our constitution's Preamble puts it. The IWW

and our sister organizations reject this slogan, embracing "the revolutionary watchword,

"Abolition of the wage system." Our goal is to "bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old," to quote the song "Solidarity Forever." We should welcome rising militancy but we should be prepared for the people calling the shots in venture syndicalist projects to act as a force for the old society against the creation of a new world out of its ashes. We must remember that not all struggles help to end capitalism, and that militancy and radicalism are two different things.

Unions which are committed to nothing more than "fair wages" are like a gas stove. Different parts of a stove create and sustain fire, but also contain fire, keep it from getting above a certain temperature, prevent it from spreading or joining

up with other fires, and put it out by cutting off the fuel. Similarly, different parts of reformist unions create and sustain class struggle, keep it from getting too hot, prevent it from spreading too much or joining up with other struggles, and bring conflicts to an end. Gas stoves are about making fire useful for cooking. Ultimately, reformist unions and government labor policy are about making the fires of class struggle useful to capitalism.

Venture syndicalism is an attempt to make unions once again into important tools for governing U.S. capitalism. This involves creating and sustaining some of the fire of class

struggle. We should welcome that, but we should also be aware that reformist unions fight for goals which will include their ability to contain, limit, and end struggles, if struggles get intense enough. Aspects of venture syndicalism will pull class struggle in the direction of the old world we reject. This means that IWW members who participate in these efforts should ask ourselves if our participation amounts to anything more than “we follow the strategy set by the people in charge and help them win on their terms.” If not, then we are basically just volunteers in a project oriented fundamentally around the conservative “fair wages” vision we reject.

I am almost but not quite saying that these campaigns are reformist so the IWW should not participate. IWW members should participate in venture syndicalist projects...if we have nothing better to do. In those cases, we should participate with a plan to gain skills, experience, confidence, and relationships so that we will eventually have something better to do. When we participate, we should be honest with ourselves about whether or not, and how, we are actually accomplishing our goals. We should also be clear about what we are and are not going to accomplish as volunteers in venture syndicalist projects. I am reminded of John L. Lewis, president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s. Lewis was relatively conservative but he liked hiring radicals as organizing staff. When criticized by moderates for this decision, his reply showed that he did not see radical participation in the CIO as a threat to capitalism: “Who gets the bird, the hunter or the dog?” he said. When we participate in venture syndicalist projects, we should always remember who holds the leash.

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